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SUBJECT: LARGER PROTESTS IN FAR EAST AGAINST INCREASED AUTO TARIFFS

REF: VLADIVOSTOK 130

¶1. Ten thousand demonstrators took to the streets in Primorye on December 14 to protest the upcoming increase in used car import tariffs, blocking main roads in Vladivostok and smaller cities for up to eight hours. Several thousand cars from Vladivostok, Ussuriisk and Nakhodka also organized a blockade of the airport. This is the latest -- and largest -- in a series of such protests and it attracted considerably more attention from law enforcement and officials. OMON special police detained 15 protesters in Vladivostok and 26 near the airport, and Vladivostok Mayor Igor Pushkaryov and Acting Governor Aleksandr Kostenko directly appealed to protesters to call off the blockades.

¶2. Protesters held banners calling for a boycott of Yedinaya Rossiya, for PM Vladimir Putin's resignation, and sardonically pushing for officials to stop being hypocritical and start driving Russian-made cars themselves. The media, presumably told by authorities to abstain from covering the event, mostly stayed away. Some outlets that did file reports placed the number of participants at around 200.

¶3. The following day, protest organizers passed a written appeal to newly-elected Primorye Senator Vyacheslav Fetisov for delivery to Prime Minister Putin regarding the customs fee increases. Primorye deputies themselves also appealed to the federal government to postpone the increase.

¶4. The issue has shown that residents of Primorye are certainly capable of organizing when pressed by an issue they consider important, and that they can quickly stage effective demonstrations when needed. Despite the inconvenience caused by the demonstration, public opinion is heavily in favor of the protesters. Participants reported that even the militia men working that day to contain the crowds -- who more than likely own or plan to buy imported used Japanese cars -- expressed unofficial support for the protesters. One positive side effect of the demonstration was that traffic police reported half as many traffic accidents than usual that day.

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